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LIBRARY SERVICE TO LABOR

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HISTORICAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PUBLIC LIBRARIES AND TRADE UNIONS

By Peggy Sullivan*

The Public library in the United States has a long record of work in direct and indirect cooperation with groups of laborers, dating from the emergence of libraries and trade unions during the same period, from 1825 through 1850. Merchants' and tradesmen's libraries in many localities formed the nuclei for libraries to be used by the general public. In other instances, tax-supported libraries and tradesmen's libraries developed concurrently, to the advantage of both, because of the carry-over from one to the other.¹ In the early days, the aims and holdings of both types of libraries were markedly similar since the collections set up by the workers themselves indicated that "utilitarianism did not exclude the conviction that merchants must be men of culture, as the emphasis on books of literature, philosophy, and science testifies."²

It was the reception of Carnegie grants and the funds contributed locally to "match" them that brought on the first rift between laborers as a class and the public libraries. Not many labor organizations were as radical as the united Pittsburgh groups which circulated petitions in 1892, in which they requested that Carnegie's proffered one million dollars for a library be rejected for these reasons: the proposed location was not suitable for the workers, taxes were levied without an enabling election, and the gift was made possible by reduced wages for workers.³ The third reason received more credence at the time than might seem reasonable, as can be judged from the widely-circulated apocryphal story of the worker, present at the opening of another Carnegie library, who shouted at sight of the unveiled statue of a workman in tattered clothes depicted dramatically clasping a book above his head: "That's Andy Carnegie for you! He takes the shirt off his back!"

*This is Chapter II of Miss Sullivan's Master's thesis in library science, Catholic University of America, 1953. We may be able to reproduce other sections of the thesis in a subsequent issue.

AMERICAN LIBRARY
ASSOCIATION

and puts a book in his hand!" This same sentiment was expressed more impassionately by radical labor leader Eugene V. Debs who vowed: "We want libraries, and we will have them in glorious profusion when capitalism is abolished and workingmen are no longer robbed by the philanthropic pirates of the Carnegie class. . . ."4 Samuel Gompers, founder of the comparatively liberal American Federation of Labor, favored the acceptance of all Carnegie grants in these words: "Yes, accept his library, organize the workers, secure better conditions and, particularly, reduction in hours of labor, and then the workers will have the chance and leisure in which to read books."5 This statement hinted at the campaign later waged by labor, requesting that public library hours be extended to make it convenient for workers to use the facilities on Sundays and other periods of free time.

The very low percentage of registered library users who were laborers is pointed up in the report of the Boston Public Library as late as 1898 when, of seventy-two thousand card-holders, only seven hundred two were classed as laborers. However, the report continued, the number of laborers using the library was actually greater than this would indicate, since workers were often in the reading room but, according to the librarian, the laborer "shrinks from the formalities and betrayal incident to applications for books to use at home Therefore, in planning a children's department of a public library, one of the contingencies to be foreseen is. . . that any particular book may reach beyond the child to the adult."6 Two implications may be drawn from this statement. The laborers' children may have had easier access to library facilities

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The opinions expressed in this newsletter do not necessarily represent the policy or views of the Joint Committee on Library Service to Labor Groups. Contributions of news and articles are welcomed by the editor.

because of the library hours which labor groups were protesting and, secondly, the laborers may have been able to read only books written on the simplest levels. Aside from the overall lower level of education in the late 1800's as compared with today's, there was the problem of the foreign-born— that multilingual group of immigrants which flooded into this country after the European upheavals of mid-century. The opening of children's rooms and the work of public libraries with the foreign-born at the turn of the century were worth noting in the Public Library Inquiry. . . .⁷

There is, nevertheless, a great gap between library service suitable for immigrants individually seeking a source of materials useful to them in their adjustment, and adequate service for a highly organized union of workers who might formerly have been classed as immigrants but who have adjusted and found their level in the socio-economic strata. Indeed, the educational function of the public library has been altered in accordance with this trend toward solidifying class demarcations and the ensuing demand for accreditation in the professions and trades. Although the public library has necessarily been the source of supplementary reading rather than a direct educative organ, its "role as an independent educational agency is decreasing rather than increasing over the years . . . and it should not be rated as an agency with major educational goals of its own."⁸

In a sense, organized labor groups having educational programs — notable among these is the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union — are in a category with the public library as agencies concerned with education but without independent educational goals of their own. Actually, the more correct term for this type of agency as set up by the trade unions is an informational program, since their aim is two-fold: the indoctrination of union tenets into workers and liaison between the union and cooperating groups, including of course the public library. This mission of liaison is a main cause of the confusion which has arisen concerning the unionization of library employees and the work of the library with union groups. The snobbery inherent in the report of the Boston Public Library quoted above⁹ was typical of the attitude of librarians toward laborers in that period. In dispelling this, librarians have sought after a great deal more social intelligence, and new recruits to their ranks represent representatives from the classes once grouped as foreign-born. These have been factors in librarians' more liberal attitude toward laboring men as individuals and toward trade unions as such. However, while this social intelligence may cause the rise of library unions as well as increased interest in work with union groups, there is no direct relationship between these two activities. Such confusion as has arisen may be the result of such statements as this: "Intimidated, underpaid, inadequately trained librarians cannot make the library an instrument for increasing liberty through social intelligence."¹⁰ A typical result of the failure to distinguish between these two programs was recounted in the Public Library Inquiry: "In a majority of our sample, librarians have not themselves seriously considered direct service to labor unions, though actively searching for direct links to organized groups. One large city library has allowed experiments with service to factories and unions to become confused institutionally and ideologically with the unionization of its own staff; and library board and chief librarian maintain a hands-off coolness to the project."¹¹ On the part of librarians, the cause of such confusion may well be the seeking of a common ground with union leaders. This requires a sympathetic interest in their problems, and the unionization of the library staff may seem to be a mutually satisfactory way of winning their confidence and eradicating the stigma of "middle-class highbrow" that was formerly such an apt description of many librarians.

It is not our concern in this paper to determine the pros and cons of staff unionization, since we are not directly concerned with it. There must be some more direct clue to the actual effectiveness of library service to trade unions. While, as we have seen, there has consistently been a link between the growth of public libraries and the well-being of trade unions on a nation-wide scale, the library must be assured of some return on its investment of time, effort, and finances on behalf of trade unions. This account demonstrates a gratifying response given by a trade union in 1900, when "On April 13 a delegation from the Hagerstown Bricklayers' Union called on the promoters of the proposed public free library. . . and promised that each member of the union would give a day's work on the library building, which it is expected will shortly be begun. An architect is drawing plans for the building."¹² The offer of the Hagerstown bricklayers was the public-spirited movement of a group of individuals cooperating as a labor group, carrying out the project by contributing the one factor which was their unique contribution - their labor. In 1944, it was another public library, this time in Denver, which was grateful to a labor group. Both the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations locals participated in the successful campaign for a two million five hundred thousand dollar library bond issue.¹³ Here, the locals were acting in the role that unions have played in their recent years of power - the role of a big business type of political pressure group. The increase in the trade union's political and social prestige is strikingly typified by these two actions, coming as they do nearly a half century apart and pointing up the tremendous growth of power and self-confidence on the part of American trade unions. It was largely due to this emergence of the trade union as a powerful ally that more public libraries set up programs dealing with trade union groups. As the movement gained followers, the American Library Association saw the need for a steering group. To this need, we may attribute the formation of the group called the American Library Association Joint Committee on Library Service to Labor Groups.

1. Merle Curti, Growth of American Thought, (New York: Harper, 1943), p. 364
2. Ibid.
3. Sidney Ditzion, Arsenals of a Democratic Culture (Chicago: American Library Association, 1947), p. 161.
4. Quoted in Ditzion, op. cit., p. 163.
5. Ibid., p. 162.
6. "The Library and the Laborer," Library Journal, XXV (1900), 112.
7. Oliver Garceau, The Public Library in the Political Process (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949), p. 48.
8. L. H. Kirkpatrick, "Passing of the Self-Educated Man," Wilson Library Bulletin, XXIV (June, 1950), 744.
9. "The Library and the Laborer," op. cit.
10. Mark Starr, "Librarians and Labor," Library Journal, LXXI (March 15, 1946),
11. Garceau, op. cit., p. 122.
12. "Library Economy and History," Library Journal, XXV (1900), 245.
13. Miriam E. McNally, "Library Service to Labor Unions," Wilson Library Bulletin, XXII (January, 1948), 385

ANY QUESTIONS?

We plan to have this section each issue. Please send in your questions and a member of the Joint Committee will try his hand at answering. If any reader disagrees with the answer or has an additional comment, please send them to the editor. We hope this column will be controversial!

- Q. Is it true that many labor people resent being handed a book telling of the struggles and hardships of the labor movement because they want to look forward rather than backward?
- A. I do not think "resentment" is a typical reaction. It is only natural that union members should be less interested in the past than they are in the events that are taking place at present in the labor movement and in the political, economic, and social affairs of the nation. We all know that there are episodes in the history of unionism as in other aspects of American life that are unpleasant and to which we cannot point with pride. But the struggle of the worker over the years for decent wages and conditions of work and for the security in his job is an honorable, and often courageous story. Union education leaders today are making efforts to educate their members along these lines so that union members will feel a part of a great social movement. Such readable labor histories as Foster R. Dulles' Labor in America, Aline Austin's The Labor Story, and the histories of individual unions such as have been issued by the Ladies' Garment Workers, the Steelworkers, and the International Association of Machinists should appeal to union members. The librarian working with union members, also has a responsibility to read and become acquainted with such works. Another way to introduce union members to labor history is through good labor bibliography and fiction. An announcement of a bibliography on the Worker in American Fiction is given elsewhere in this issue.
- Q. Are the big unions interested in having libraries request to be placed on a regular mailing list for free union material - pamphlets, periodicals and newspapers?
- A. Only a few national unions maintain general mailing lists to which they are willing to add the names of schools and libraries without question. Most unions, however, are forced by limitation of funds to be selective in the distribution of their publications. A labor librarian, therefore, should give careful consideration to the labor union pattern in the community and also should get acquainted with publications of labor unions to determine which will be most useful. Based on this information he should decide what he wants in the way of publications and then make a special appeal to these unions for specific materials and for a subscription to their periodicals. It sometimes helps to work through local members of the respective unions who can write their national headquarters on behalf of the library. The library, however, should be prepared to pay for a subscription to a labor paper now and then, just as it would for any other periodical that it believes will be useful. (An article on the selection of labor periodicals appears in the May-June 1952 issue of Library Service to Labor, copies of which are still available.)

NEWS NOTES

RUSKIN COLLEGE (OXFORD) SCHOLARSHIPS will be offered to three Americans this year by the Transatlantic Foundation. Candidates will be chosen from those actively involved in the trade union movement who show possibilities of leadership and a talent for continued study of labor problems at a university level. Applicants should be between the ages of 20 and 35. The last date of scholarship applications is April 1, 1955. For further information and application forms write to the Committee on Labor Scholarships, Institute of International Education, 1 East 67th Street, New York 21, N.Y.

FILM DISCUSSION GUIDES FOR UNION USE is the title of a kit of materials for use in showing union films, issued by Roosevelt University, Labor Education Division (430 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago 5, Ill. \$1.50 per kit). The kit includes a list of film sources, a checklist for the film discussion leader, and individual discussion guides for 20 labor films.

MARK STARR is the author of an article, "The Library Helps Labor" in the October 1954 issue of the ALA Bulletin (pp. 485-87). This is part of a series of articles on "The Community Speaks."

THE WORKER IN AMERICAN FICTION by Virginia Prestridge, is a new annotated bibliography issued by the Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations, University of Illinois (704 S. Sixth Street, Champaign, Ill.). It lists American novels which present fictional treatment of the worker and his problems and which deal with authentic working class problems and conditions as the central theme. Price \$1.